

Adrift and Ad-Libbing

A Footloose American in a Smugglers' Den

In Puerto Estrella, Colombia, there is little to do but talk. It is difficult to say just what the villagers are talking about, however, because they speak their own language—a tongue called Guajiro, a bit like Arabic, which doesn't ring well in a white man's ear.

Usually they are talking about smuggling, because this tiny village with thatched roof huts and a total population of about 100 South American Indians is a very important port of entry. Not for humans, but for items like whisky and tobacco and jewelry. It is not possible for a man to get there by licensed carrier, because there are no immigration officials and no customs. There is no law at all, in fact, which is precisely why Puerto Estrella is such an important port.

It is far out at the northern tip of a dry and rocky peninsula called La Guajira, on which there are no roads and a great deal of overland truck traffic. The trucks carry contraband, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of it, bound for the interiors of Colombia and Venezuela. Most of it comes from Aruba, brought over at night on fast trawlers and put ashore at Puerto Estrella for distribution down the peninsula on the trucks.

**Hospitality Is Strained**  
I arrived at dusk on a fishing sloop from Aruba. And since there is no harbor I was put ashore in a tiny rowboat. Above us, on a sharp cliff, stood the entire population of the village, staring grimly and without much obvious hospitality at Puerto Estrella's first tourist in history.

In Aruba, the Guajiro Indians are described as "fierce and crazy and drunk all day on coconut whisky." Also in Aruba you will hear that the men wear "nothing but neckties, knotted just below the navel." That sort of information can make a man uneasy, and as I climbed the steep path, staggering under the weight of my luggage, I decided that at the first sign of unpleasantness I would begin handing out neckties like Santa Claus—three fine paisleys to the most menacing of the bunch, then start ripping up shirts.

As I came over the brink of the cliff, a few children laughed, an old hag began screeching, and the men just stared. Here was a white man with 12 Yankee dollars in his pocket and more than \$500 worth of camera gear slung over his shoulders, hauling a typewriter, grinning, sweating, no hope of speaking the language, no place to stay—and somehow they were going to have to deal with me.

There was a conference, and then a small man stepped forward and made motions indicating that I should put my gear on an ancient truck which started with a



crank. I was taken to an abandoned hospital, where I was given a sort of cell with a filthy mattress and broken windows to let in the air.

There is not much for the tourist in Puerto Estrella, no hotels, restaurants, or souvenirs. Nor is the food palatable. Three times a day I faced it—leaves, maize, and severely salted goat meat, served up with muddy water.

The drinking was a problem too, but in a different way. At the crack of dawn on the day after my arrival I was awakened and taken before a jury of village bigwigs. Its purpose was to determine the meaning of my presence. These gentlemen had gathered in the only concrete-block house in town, and before them on the table was a cellophane-wrapped bottle of Scotch whisky.

After an hour or so of gestures, a few words of Spanish, and nervous demonstrations of my camera equipment, they seemed to feel a drinking bout was in order. The Scotch was opened, five jiggers were filled, and the ceremony began.

**A Prolonged Party**  
It continued all that day and all the next. They tossed it off straight in jiggers, solemnly at first and then with mounting abandon. Now and then one of them would fall asleep in a hammock, only to return a few hours later with new thirst and vigor. At the end of one bottle they would proudly produce another, each one beautifully wrapped in cellophane.

As it turned out, three things made my visit a success. One was my size and drinking capacity (it was fear—a man traveling alone among reportedly savage Indians dares not get drunk); another was the fact that I never turned down a request for a family portrait (fear, again); and the third was my "lifelong acquaintance" with Jacqueline Kennedy, whom they regard as some sort of goddess.

With the exception of a few sophisticates and local bigwigs, most of the men wore the necktie—a Guajiro version of the time-honored loin-cloth. The women, again with a few exceptions, wore dull and shapeless long black gowns.

A good many of the men also wore two and three hundred dollar wrist watches, a phenomenon explained by the strategic location of Puerto Estrella and the peculiar nature of its economy. It would not be fair to say that the Indians

*This article was written for The National Observer by Hunter S. Thompson, a free lance journalist making an extended trip through Latin America.*

arbitrarily take a healthy cut of all the contraband that passes through their village, but neither would it be wise to arrive and start asking pointed questions, especially since anyone arriving on his own is wholly dependent on the good will of the Indians to get him out again.

Trying to leave can turn a man's hair white. You are simply stuck until one of the Indians has to run some contraband down the peninsula to Malcao.

There is nothing to do but drink, and after 50 hours of it I began to lose hope. The end seemed to be nowhere in sight, and it is bad enough to drink Scotch all day in any climate, but to come to the tropics and start belting it down for three hours each morning before breakfast can bring on a general failure of health. In the mornings we had Scotch and arm-wrestling; in the afternoons, Scotch and dominoes.

The break came at dusk on the third day, when the owner of a truck called

the Power Wagon rose abruptly from the drinking table and said we would leave immediately. We had a last round, shook hands all around, and shoved off. The truck was fully loaded, and I rode in back with my gear and a young Indian girl.

The drive from Puerto Estrella to Malcao is 10 to 12 hours, depending on which rut you take, but it seems like 40 days on the rack. On top of the helinous discomfort, there is the distinct possibility of being attacked and shot up by either bandits or the law. As far as the Contrabandista is concerned, one is as bad as the other.

The smugglers travel armed but they put their faith in speed, punishing both truck and passengers unmercifully as they roar through dry river beds and across long veldt-like plains on a dirt track which no conventional car could ever navigate.

We rumbled into Malcao at three in the afternoon. They dropped me at the airport, where my luggage was thoroughly searched by a savage-looking gendarme before I was allowed on the plane for Barranquilla. An hour later, there was another search at the Barranquilla airport. When I asked why, they replied I was coming from an area called Guajira, known to be populated by killers and



Citizens of Puerto Estrella, Colombia, delighted with the camera, watch it and the cameraman, the village's first tourist.

thieves and men given over to lives of crime and violence.

I had a feeling that nobody really believed I had been there. When I tried to talk about Guajira, people would smile

sympathetically and change the subject. And then we would have another beer, because Scotch is so expensive in Barranquilla that only the rich can afford it.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON

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